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WHEN FACT-CHECKING IS NOT WEIRD: CHALLENGES IN FACT-CHECKING BEYOND THE WESTERN WORLD

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Background

Fact-checking has rapidly achieved a pivotal role in regulating the public debate globally. Initially designed as a tool to verify public discourses and hold politicians to account, while also improving journalistic practices (Graves, 2016), fact-checking has recently broadened its scope to identify and correct misinformation online. To this end, fact-checkers engage in initiatives promoting media literacy (Bulger & Davison, 2018), enforcing social media platforms' content moderation policies (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020), and building digital knowledge infrastructures (Nissen et al., 2022). Their perception as truth-promoters has drawn hopeful if oversized expectations from policymakers both in the United States and Europe (Caplan et al., 2018; Comission, 2018) who requested the allocation of considerable resources to fact-checkers who routinely track the circulation of harmful content online. Although fact-checking misinformation may struggle to rein in the firehose of misinformation online (Vinhas & Bastos, 2022), it has nonetheless grounded itself as a worldwide movement, particularly in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) countries.

Literature on fact-checking beyond the West is still forthcoming, particularly with respect to content moderation. Social platforms apply their community rules globally and uniformly; a set of guidelines that fail to adhere to the wide range of cultural and religious norms undergirding the use of Facebook globally (Henrich et al., 2010). Indeed, fact-checking meta-analyses show that empirical research is disproportionately focused on the US (Walter et al., 2019), even if the fact-checking industry is becoming more diverse, operating across more cultures and languages of recent (Stencel & Luther, 2021). Fact-checkers are keenly aware of these shortcomings, as the effective correction of misinformation (Porter & Wood, 2021) requires familiarity with local

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idiosyncrasies that drive much of what practitioners implement and how they make sense of fact-checking locally (Ferracioli et al., 2022). Given the above, we seek to catalog the many different forms of organizing and implementing fact-checks beyond the de facto standard found in Western industrialized countries, where fact-checking streams from journalistic practices of verification (Hanitzsch, 2018).

Methodology

We analyzed 37 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with fact-checkers from 35 organizations operating in 27 non-WEIRD countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. The interviews were conducted in three different languages (English, Portuguese, and Spanish) and took place between March and November of 2021. We identified as legitimate, independent fact-checking organizations those that met at least one of the following criteria: 1) listed as an active organization on Duke Reporters' Lab fact-checking database; 2) current signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN); 3) declared a consistent commitment to editorial non-partisanship and financial independence on their websites, along with a detailed description of transparent fact-checking methodologies. Interview data was transcribed and translated for downstream analyses using thematic clustering in N-Vivo.

We aimed to identify the emerging challenges posed to non-WEIRD fact-checkers and what strategies they implement in their fight against misinformation locally. Our main goal was to describe how social, linguistic, cultural, and political backgrounds influence fact-checking standards among different national settings and the theoretical import of our study drawn from work that detailed the limits of fact-checking to counter the misinformation landscape (Vinhas & Bastos, 2022). As such, the interviews revolved around three topics: 1) personal motivations and work routine; 2) methodological processes; 3) strategies to offset misinformation and ameliorate the public debate. The in-depth interviews provide granular information on how non-WEIRD fact-checking experts view their work, what types of claims they often classify as misinformation, and what measures they adopt to mitigate potential shortcomings.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings show that non-WEIRD fact-checkers endure challenges in combating dis- and misinformation and are similar to those reported in Western fact-checking organizations. There are, however, peculiar challenges that emerge in contexts where public discourse lacks a well-established stable political body and political sphere to support deliberation, including non-partisan organizations providing support for deliberation and democratic dispute so that they are kept apart from partisan disputes that cut across the fault-lines in local politics. These challenges are identified through an analysis of seven types of challenges common to non-WEIRD fact-checking organizations, which are associated with and speak to institutional, infrastructural, political, methodological, social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions.

These issues provide a clear but cautionary picture of the many emerging challenges that are specific to local contexts and cultures. These include the relative scarcity of local authoritative sources, the inaccessibility of public data, and potential risks of

government censorship. Other commonly discussed challenges include the absence of media literacy skills in large swathes of the population, as well as the inaction of social platforms in enforcing content moderation policies. Taken together, these issues cause institutional uncertainty and distrust in institutions, a combination of factors that make it difficult for fact-checkers to be perceived as neutral actors in the public debate. These problems are compounded in countries where military conflicts, religious fervor, and ethnic conflict steer much of the social and political polarization.

In summary, while fact-checkers are relentless in their promotion of democratic values worldwide (Amazeen, 2020), the standards that support the industry may vary substantially around the world, particularly where truth-seeking practices evolved detached from notions of democracy, truth, and journalistic integrity (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014).

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